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ANTIOCH -- There's no turning back now. Work continues to roll forward on the Highway 4 widening project throughout the East Contra Costa corridor, as Pittsburg's Loveridge Road, all of Antioch's exits and Brentwood's Sand Creek Road will soon be in the midst of some kind of construction.

"This is an important step in expanding the mobility and efficiency of this region," Contra Costa Transportation Authority Executive Director Randell Iwasaki said Monday, during a "groundbreaking" for the interchange at Hillcrest Avenue -- the fifth and final segment of the project to widen Highway 4 from four to eight lanes.

Officials with the transportation authority and Caltrans used the event to take about 50 elected officials, staff members and media members on a tour showing the progress on Highway 4, including a transfer station for BART's East Contra Costa extension, dubbed eBART.

Work to this point is going smoothly and on budget, they said.

Seven transit projects are under way in the region: the five to widen Highway 4 to eight lanes, the Brentwood project to widen Highway 4 to four lanes and add on- and offramps at Sand Creek and eBART. Each segment is coordinated so contractors don't overlap.

Work on the Hillcrest stretch, which starts next month, includes expanding the number of lanes from just east of the thoroughfare to the Highway 160 interchange, along with a on- and offramps at Hillcrest. It will also consist of several components of BART's Antioch station, including a pedestrian overcrossing, station platform and station house and a tunnel underneath the westbound lanes so trains can get into their maintenance station.

All told, the region's seven projects will total \$1.3 billion worth of transit improvements for the region. The Highway 4 widening is scheduled to be completed by fall 2015, eBART two years later.

"This is going to create access throughout East Contra Costa," BART board Vice President Joel Keller said.

Much of the freeway construction removing old bridges and building new ones, adding retaining walls and expanding the roads is being done at night, meaning traffic is not obstructed during the day's peak hours. Iwasaki said.

However, the traffic has often been switched to different lanes and configurations as work is being done, which can be dangerous.

"Drivers really need to pay attention to the signs," Iwasaki said.

A point made by many at Monday's event is that the commute drive through Pittsburg and Antioch is one of the nation's worst. About 130,000 people drive Highway 4 each day, said Malcolm Dougherty, Caltrans director.

Officials hope the completed project will change that.

"I'm tired of seeing traffic reporters featuring (Highway 4) on their reports," said Don Tatzin, the transportation authority's chair. "Hopefully, when (the widening) is done, they'll go elsewhere.

"The highway widening will also improve the quality of life for East Contra Costa residents and be a catalyst for economic development, Antioch Mayor Wade Harper said.

"Every time lanes close, we're seeing progress. Every time the jackhammers are going, it means economic development," he said.